

PURITY AND POLLUTION: THE DYNAMICS OF SOCIAL SYSTEM IN

U. R. ANANTHA MURTHY'S SAMASKARA

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ABSTRACT

This paper will take you to have a closer look at Anantha Murthy's rage at the oppressive traditions, convictions rituals and inhuman attitude of the Brahmin community of the sixties represented by the orthodox Brahmins of a lively village in Karnataka. The whole novel is a conflict and tussle between good and evil, between Praneshacharya's own penance and Naranappa's demonic ways. Insurgent Naranappa's death brings in its wake a plague, moral chaos and various questions without answers. His death leaves behind the complicated problem of whether a heretic could receive the death rites due to a Brahmin. In trying to work out the dilemma of whom, if any, should perform Naranappa's death-rite, Praneshacharya - the Guru of the Agrahara begins a samaskara-a transformation for himself. By the end of the novel, he deduces that nobody can get out of the hold of one's own community easily and Acharya decides to fulfill his commitment and obligation to the community he belongs to.

KEYWORDS: Heretic, Dilemma, Agrahara, Cremation, Community, Spiritual Evolution, Rituals, Scriptural Knowledge Prostitute & Salvation

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INTRODUCTION

A renowned recipient of the Country's highest literary awards, the Jnanpith and the Padma Bhushan, U. R. Anantha Murthy (1932-2014) has been one of the most celebrated playwrights and literary critics in contemporary India. His writing is characterized by egalitarian themes and his distrust of the caste system. Much of his work is a severe indictment of brahminical orthodoxy and evinces a subdued spirit that is restless for change. He is one of the most important representatives of the 'Navya' movement in Kannada literature. Anantha Murthy is perhaps best described by the term 'Critical Insider' that he himself used in his essay 'Being A Writer'(1992). "A truly critical insider", he says, 'would have boundless compassion for the poor and disinherited in India, would passionately engage himself with the present in all its confusion of values, and only with such a mind and heart would he know what is usable in the rich past of India for a creative present.' "Talking about how others have viewed him, he says: "I am described as a rebel against the caste system, a votary of individualism, a modernist against tradition – for which I am either praised or disliked. Nowadays... I am also either attacked or praised as a traditionalist, as a lapsed revolutionary, or as one growing soft (or wise?)."

Originally published in 1965 and translated from Kannada into English by the doyen of translators, A. K. Ramanujan, Samaskara, a classic of Modern Indian Literature, is an intense exploration of the essential paradoxes of human existence. The novel that has achieved translated recognition nationally and internationally since its first publication in 1965, expresses Anantha Murthy's rage at the oppressive tradition of Brahminism which is decadent

and burdensome and describes the spiritual struggle of an individual as he tries to forge a new identity for himself. The novel, which is a narratoday's three days incidents provides its readers a chance to stop and look back at our age -old convictions, beliefs, Hindu myths, dogmas, rituals, customs, traditions, and superstitions. It thoroughly discusses the modern man's quest of his true self in terms of themes like asceticism and eroticism and Brahminism and anti-Brahminism, which are cast in the form of an allegory rich in realistic detail. It is an accurate estimate of Brahmin society in the sixties which suffers the serious problem of backwardness despite having intellectuals, cerebral persons and learned scholars among them. The story of the novel is told by a fictive omniscient narrator who stands outside the action of the novel, which, as a whole, is a Conflict between two extreme ways of life, the ascetic and the hedonistic. The former is represented by the orthodox Brahmins of Durvasapura, a village in Karnataka, led by Praneshacharya whereas the latter by their intransigent, obstinate, pleasure-loving and anti-Brahminical Brahmin Naranappa who breached his caste limits during his lifetime. The novel is all about the question whether the Brahmins are really dignified, modest and enlightened enough to understand the meaning of being a devout Brahmin in the real sense. The conflict and tussle is between good and evil, between Punya and Papa, between Acharya's own penance and Naranappa's demonic ways. The conflict between them is clearly stated by the latter: "All right, let's see who wins, Acharya. You or me? Let's see how long will all this Brahmin business last."

The very opening event of the novel is insurgent Naranappa's death, which brings in its wake a plague, moral chaos, many deaths and various questions without answers, old answers that do not fit the new questions, and the most significantly, a rebirth of one good Brahmin, Praneshacharya-popularly known as 'the Crest Jewel of Vedic Learning'. The death of Naranappa leaves behind him the prickly problem of whether a heretic could receive the death rites due to a Brahmin. The whole novel is basically structured around the arduous attempt to solve the dilemma. In trying to resolve the dilemma of whom, if any, should perform the dissident's death-rite (a samaskara), the Acharya, the Guru of the Agrahara, begins a samaskara (a transformation) for himself. A rite for a dead man becomes a rite of passage for a living. The novel sets into motion when one morning Naranappa's low-caste mistress Chandri informs Praneshacharya about the death of Naranappa. The Acharya leaves his home at once to inform the whole Brahmin community of the village as no Brahmin could take meals while the dead body of a fellow Brahmin lay uncremated. After this incident, the whole novel revolves around Naranappa only who is a Brahmin by birth and an anti-Brahmin by life. Because of his anti-Brahmin activities and behavior, the Brahmin community of Agrahara falls in a dilemma regarding his samaskara. Since he had no children so the most important question was-who would do the death rites? While Naranappa was alive, he used to warn the Brahmin community that they will be thrown into the gutters the day they die. So the fellow who used to say such things about his own community, how could he be cremated as a Brahmin? The pertinent question here is how to cremate his dead body and who is authorized to perform the last death-rites of Narnappa's body?

Acharya delves deep into all the sacred books-the Vedas, Puranas and upnishads which do not contain the proper solution to the dilemma they are facing. While Brahmins of the colony are anxiously waiting on Praneshacharya's verandah to hear his verdict, Chandri with her good intentions, stunned the Brahmins of the whole Agrahara by offering all her gold ornaments to pay for the funeral expenses of Naranappa. It suddenly occurs to Praneshacharya that he should go to the Maruti (Hanuman) temple across the river and seek His help. Chandri also follows him unknowingly, waiting for his word at a safe distance in the forest. But the Monkey-God also disappoints by not giving him any sign of a solution. Famished, distressed, grief-stricken and in a state of pathetic condition, Acharya walk out of temple with slow steps and is soon joined by Chandri in the dark forest. Chandri bends and grasps his knees. He touches her hair with compassion, but at the

moment, the real Praneshacharya – a worldly human being, raises and they make love to each other. Anantha Murthy here aptly scans human weakness: "The Acharya's repressed sexual hunger, so far unconscious, suddenly raged, and he cried out like a child in distress, 'Amma'. The key word in the text here is 'hunger' -physical hunger and sexual hunger, both of which Chandri satisfies. Chandri is all women in one-both a mother and a lover. She feeds him plantains like a mother and also satisfies his great sexual need". The basic purpose of the pedant Acharya to go to the Maruti temple was to consult the vedantas and to seek the solution of the problem from the God itself. But he failed to judge the vile intentions of Chandri. After his return from the temple, Acharya felt anguished for the relations he had established with Chandri the previous night.

He held himself responsible for what had happened and surrendered himself before the community declaring that he was no more spirit Guru of the Agrahara since he had committed a heinous sin. The villagers pleaded that the consequences of his sexual union with Chandri was accidental and acceptable to them without any grudge. Chandri, on her part, does not want to trouble shattered and down-graded Acharya anymore and hence with the help of one of Naranappa's Muslim friend Abdul Bari; she finishes the process of cremation. The dead body, as she thought, was 'neither Brahmin nor shudra. A carcass. A stinking, rotting carcass'. Thereafter, without intimating anything to anybody in the Agrahara, Chandri leaves the scene forever and departs for her native place Kundapura.

In meeting and mating with Chandri, Acharya comes in contact with someone who is entirely different from him and who stands at the opposite pole of his wide social spectrum. But it is she who gives him his first healthy experience of female sexuality. She infuses a new life in him. This experience means the beginning of the breaking of all social barriers for him. In a real sense he goes beyond the secluded and morbid world of the Brahmins of Durvasapura in which he has lived so far. With this initiative, questions of purity and rituals that seemed so urgent earlier are now no longer relevant in Acharya's life and he starts doing what Naranappa had done for years. At first, he is found enjoying the pleasures of life. He wanders through the thick forests and loiters desolate on solitary roads. He apparently enjoys cockfights, visits fairs and the colorful Melige festival, sleeps with Chandri and desires to sleep with another prostitute Padmavati. The learned scholar also eats a holy feast sitting in a temple-line in a temple in an unclean and unused condition with Brahmins.

Chandri, an ultimate choice of a heroine of the novel, represents a woman of her own kind. She did and achieve whatever she wanted. She is not only untouchable in the Agrahara but even invisible as, it is assumed, that only a look of her will defile the Brahmins of the village. But the class and caste structure make her so much underweight that "if the Acharya talked to her, he would be polluted; he would have to bath again before his meal." Despite being a prostitute, she is not a negative character rather she emerges in the novel as a strong personality. By virtue of her profession, Chandri is both outside of the structured society as well as recognized by it. Everyone in the Agrahara despises her but behind the veil, everyone is mad after her fascinating and astonishing beauty and aspires to possess her. The novel depicts: "The Brahmins went to each other's yards each morning to get flowers for worship. But the flowers that bloomed in Naranappa's yard were reserved solely for Chandri's hair and for a vase in the bedroom".

The text of the novel further reads that Chandri's style of functioning changes as per the circumstances and the conditions. She acts and reacts as per the need of the hour. She is presented as 'Apsara' of heaven at one time while at the other she has been presented as a devil of hell. One can easily note that she is never late in executing her actions in the novel. Soon after the death of Naranappa Chandri makes up her mind towards Acharya and succeeds in her mission. She prays to Lord Vishnu that Praneshacharya should fulfill her desire for sex. She thinks that since Bhagirathi-the wife of

Acharya is not well in health, so the young Acharya can like her. She listens a view from her inner conscience that she should be pregnant from the holy Acharya and succeeds in her planning. Here it is also pertinent to mention that Acharya. The great follower of Vedanta-does not accept Chandri out of compassion. He took her because the body's "tigerish lust" long muffled, all of a sudden leapt to the surface.

Since Chandri belongs to the lower caste, her understanding is always under question as if she is an immature. This is just a wrong notion, because in the whole course of the novel she is the one who presents herself with mature and seasoned vision than anyone else in the whole Agrahara.

The novelist rightly states that even as a prostitute, she might be treated sinless like "Tunga River 'that purifies the sins of everybody. "Born to prostitutes, she was an exception to all rules. She was ever-auspicious, daily-wedded, the one without widowhood. How can sin defile a running river? It's good for a drink when a man's thirsty and it's good for bathing the god's images with it says yes to everything, never a No. Like her. Doesn't dry up, doesn't tire. Tunga, the river that doesn't dry, doesn't tire".

The novel is a narrative centrally concerned with the spiritual evolution of Praneshacharya. He is extremely sensitive to the needs, discomfort, and pain of his fellow human beings. When he realizes that Naranappa's concubine is sleeping in his verandah without a mat or a blanket or a pillow, he provides her all these things along with the gold ornaments that she had given to him for meeting the funeral expenses of her deceased lover Naranappa. The sudden death of Naranappa brings the real examination of Praneshacharya's ideals, sapience, wisdom and understanding. This event brings a real man out of Acharya's being, overburdened with stifling scriptural knowledge and religious ideology. At sixteen Acharya had sought to achieve salvation through self-sacrifice. He had deliberately married an invalid and sick woman Bhagirathi so that he could serve her and lead a celibate life to keep him chaste and dedicated. But his unforeseen sex with Chandri changed everything. The meaning of the experience changed for him. Experience, Acharya realized, did not mean what one wanted, but doing the unpredictable. He now wants to live like an ordinary man, neither a virtuous Brahmin nor 'the Crest Jewel of Vedic Learning'. He resigns from the post of spiritual headship of the village feeling remorseful and downhearted for the relations he had established with Chandri, holding him responsible for the development. Acharya realizes that it is he and not Naranappa who had turned the Agrahara topsy-turvy. It is observed from the text of the novel that Anantha Murthy here is honest enough in his attitude. His physiological treatment with his characters in the novel is also exceptionally remarkable. Praneshacharya here opines that every moment takes place as per the will of God. One must trust in 'Karma' and the actions of 'Karma' are the reactions of one's life. He ponders that Dharma should be protected in all conditions and at every cost for the sake of the betterment of one's community and the society at large. Here, the novelist through the text clarifies his stand saying that one should face the circumstances as a challenge and a new social order is necessarily required to be established in the polluted culture and customs. One of the distinguishing characteristics of the novel is its openness. At this juncture, Acharya decides to be a saint, leaving materialistic world. It becomes clear to him that he doesn't have the skills to live in this world of sharp and cruel feelings. He experiences that the spiritual life is better than that of village life. After the death of his wife Bhagirathi, his last apparent bond with the village is also snapped. Utterly confused, he felt himself unequal to the task of living in such a world. His mind at the moment was overactive and he wanted to still it. Earlier, whenever he had to still his mind, he would recite the name of God Vishnu. But now he had to stand alone, without God. He wanted to be like a kite in the sky-floating and self-content so he tried to distance himself from God. Acharya ventures on an unplanned journey leaving all his learning and rituals behind. He decided to walk away, unseen, unidentified to an unknown destination wherever his

footsteps carried him. Now His gold lace shawls, the basil bead gold rosary and all other gifts given by the monastery do not matter to him anymore.

However, Acharya's sense of responsibility never deserts him at any stage in this open-ended novel. By the end of the text Acharya deduces that nobody can get out of the hold of one's own community easily and he feels himself to be accountable to his community-to those who had firm faith in him and he decides to go back to his village Durvasapura to fulfill his commitment to the world to the community he belongs to. His return to his own village is, in fact, the victory of faith over evils. He concludes: "I have become a mere thing. By an act of will I'll become human again. I'll become responsible for myself. That is that is. I'll give up this decision to go where the legs take me; I'll remake myself in full wakefulness".

A Quite moved at the moment, Acharya surmises: "If I begin walking now, I'll reach the Agrahara by midnight, far away from this world. In full view of the frightened Brahmins, I'll stand exposed like the naked quick of life; and I, elder in their midst, will turn into a new man at midnight. When I tell them about myself, there should be no taint of repentance in me, no trace of any sorrow that I am a sinner".

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